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SUBJECT: SECURITY UPDATE SUMMARY FOR SOUTH CENTRAL IRAQ

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SENSITIVE, BUT UNCLASSIFIED

11. (SBU) This cable covers trends and significant events that affect security in the five South Central provinces of Iraq. Items are taken from the local press or are public knowledge in the region (Najaf, Karbala, Qadisiyah, Babil, and Wasit provinces).

Najaf Province

2 (SBU) As of July 28, Najaf is calm, but tense due to two security threats: 1) a Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) threat within the city; and 2) continued demonstrations, largely by Sadrists, protesting Prime Minister Malicki's visit to the United States, and the situation in Lebanon.

13. (SBU) The press has reported that fifteen VBIEDs (cars outfitted with explosives) may have been assembled in Najaf, presumably by Al Qaeda. The actual number of VBIEDs may have been half of that. Explosions on July 6 and July 18 killed over eighty locals. Three to four VBIEDs may still be at large in Najaf. In the last two weeks, Iraqi Police and Army checkpoints have multiplied and checks are stricter. Cars with out-of-province license plates find it very difficult to enter the city. The Provincial Council is considering a plan to dig an anti-vehicle ditch around all of Najaf in order to force all vehicles to enter through checkpoints.

14. (SBU) Governor Al-Tae and the Provincial Council fired Police Chief Abbass Al M'adal this week out of frustration over the inability of provincial security forces to end car bomb attacks in Najaf. The SCIRI-dominated Provincial Council is said to want to exert additional direct control over police deployments. All parties are aware that the two bombings with mass casualties occurred in Kufa, close to radical cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr's residence. Mahdi Militia maintain a close watch over the area and attacks in Kufa could easily escalate into armed confrontations between Sadr militia units and the largely Badr-controlled police.

15. (SBU) Despite the frequent demonstrations and two large-scale VBIED attacks, Najaf remains relatively stable. The economy has picked up due to extensive public and private construction.

Karbala Province

16. (SBU) Public protests by the Al-Hassani/Sarkhi militia (a competitor to the Mahdi Militia) appear to have ended last week.

For several weeks, militia members had gathered on Thursday afternoons to protest the presence of an Iranian Consulate in Karbala (Al-Hassani is still stinging after an Iranian television documentary questioned his religious credentials) and also to demand a share of the donations to Karbala's major shrines. These marches were a potential flashpoint.

¶17. (SBU) However, a new cause for worry surfaced on July 25 when a spokesman for Karbala Sadrist mosque head Sheikh Fadhil Al-Sharii broadcast by loudspeaker a message supposedly emanating from the Sunni community in Samarra. The Sunni message, as relayed by the Sarists, was a rejection of any attempt by Shi'a militia to enter Samarra and rebuild the sacred shrine. If true, this would represent the first time the Sunni community has publicly rejected Moqtada al-Sadr's high-profile campaign to recruit workers and guards for re-building the shrine.

Diwaniyah (Qadisiyah) Province

¶18. (SBU) The security situation deteriorated over the last two weeks. Diwaniyah, a quiet provincial capital several months ago, has become a center of unrest and a source of concern across the region. Camp Echo, just outside Diwaniyah, took frequent indirect fire over the past week, largely coming from Sadrist neighborhoods on Diwaniyah's north side. Coalition Forces convoys are under increased threat from lethal Explosively Formed Projectile (EFP) attacks. On July 26, an Iraqi Security Forces patrol came under intense fire within the city. Reportedly, there was considerable collateral damage from errant militia gunfire. On July 27, an Explosively Formed Projectile (EFP) attack on an El Salvadoran convoy just one hundred meters from a police checkpoint killed one soldier and severely wounded another.

¶19. (SBU) Much of the unrest stems from provincial leadership that has avoided confrontation with the militias controlling Diwaniyah's poorer neighborhoods and played to the street in

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echoing Sadrist harsh anti-American and anti-Coalition Forces rhetoric. However, there are signs that Governor Hamza is back-pedaling on his resistance to the "occupying forces," his habitual term for Camp Echo. This week, he lifted his "no go" order to Coalition Forces on entering Diwaniyah and after a hiatus of over a month, and agreed to travel to REO Al-Hillah to resume regular PRDC meetings.

¶110. (SBU) In the last several days, the Governor received an unprecedented personal envoy from Ayatollah Ali Sistani. Local press reported that the two spoke about the security situation and the need for public unity to fight terrorism. Direct intervention by Ayatollah Sistani in governmental or security affairs is rare and highlights the degree of regional concern over Diwaniyah's problems.

¶111. (SBU) Nonetheless, provincial security is not yet improving. For example, the press reported on July 24 that two more ex-Baathists were assassinated overnight, the latest in a steady stream of executions by either the Sadr or Badr militias. The Iraqi police have shown little cooperation in pursuing militia members who tortured and killed the chief Iraqi engineer for the Army Corps of Engineers office at Camp Echo.

Babil Province

¶112. (SBU) Communities in the northern part of the province were surprised by a pitched Mahdi Militia assault on an Iraqi police station in Mussayib last week. Coalition forces killed fifteen terrorists in a brief, but intense firefight. On July 28, a Sadrist gunman was killed by a US Army patrol close to the main Sadr mosque in downtown Hillah. The Governor and a Sadrist Provincial Council member reportedly talked down militia members from assembling and mounting an attack, and a complete curfew

was imposed on the city for most of the day, including during
Friday prayers.
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